

# EMOTIONS AND BURNOUT EXPERIENCED BY FIREFIGHTERS



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## 1. Introduction

Professional activity can provide positive emotions, personal and professional fulfillment, but can also be a source of stress that gradually wears (Vara, 2007). In activities that requires an intense and emotional effort, and even a direct contact with pain and death, burnout becomes a problem (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). The worker's own expectations about their work and the interactions within the professional task are important determinants for job satisfaction and are related with specific emotions. Although there are several studies on burnout in different professions, is scant literature on the work of the firefighters and the constraints they face, ignoring the fact that the quality of services may be affected by each professional experience. According to some studies (Gil-Monte, 2005) the emergence of emotions is related to the evaluation of the characteristics of the job and task, the system of rewards, feedback on performance and conduct of the superior and co-workers. Some studies suggest the demands of work as predictors of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion (Lourel et al., 2008). Others (Zapf & Holz, 2006) shown unequivocal effects of these demands in psychological well-being of the worker, referring the emotions at work as a multidimensional construct whose dimensions have positive and negative effects on health. Events in work elicits emotions and those have direct influence on behaviors and attitudes in the workplace, leading organizations to regulate the expression of emotions, what can provoke emotional exhaustion and burnout (Gil-Monte, 2005; Marques Pinto & Chambel, 2008; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

**Key words:** burnout, emotions, firefighters

## 2. Objectives

Identify emotions in the workplace and its relationship with burnout

## 3. Method

- **Participants:** non-probabilistic sample of **100 firefighters** (59% volunteer and 41% paid for being firefighters); average age = 30.8 years (SD=10.1); the majority are men (82%) and only 18% are women; 53% single, 40% married and 7% divorced; mostly without children (60%); working by shift (77%), with a mean of 34.4 hours a week and a mean of 10.6 years of job experience (SD=8.9). Of the participants, 67% belong to the active corps and 33% are in supervising functions. The areas of operation with higher frequency are fires, road accidents, damage to infrastructures and pre-hospital emergency.
- **Instruments:** To assess burnout we have used a translated version of M.B.I. – Maslach Burnout Inventory done by Marques Pinto (2009). To assess emotions elicited by professional activity we have used the F.E.W.S. (Frankfurt Emotion Work Scales, from Zapf, Mertini, Seifert, Vogt, & Isic, 1999) preparing a portuguese adaptation authorized by the authors (Alpha Cronbach MBI = 0.85; Alpha Cronbach FEWS = 0.89).
- **Procedure:** Data were collected in a non-probabilistic sample of volunteer Firefighters who work in different domains, during 2010, using self-completion questionnaire, anonymous and confidential, after formal authorization.

## 4. Results

- The results showed a high level of personal accomplishment, and of expressing positive emotions, empathy and the demands for sensitivity (Table 1).
- Regarding correlations (Table 2), there is significant positive correlation between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion and burnout, and also between display negative emotions and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. We also found significant positive correlations between empathy, demands for sensitivity and personal accomplishment, and significant negative correlations between display positive emotions and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.
- Finally, correlations between emotions, burnout and other variables, only show a significant positive correlation of personal accomplishment with age, numbers of hours per week and length of service.

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for burnout and emotions**

	Scale between	% mean inside scale	Mean	SD
Emotional exhaustion	0 - 54	28	15,3	11,5
Depersonalization	0 - 30	26	7,9	5,9
Personal Accomplishment	0 - 48	65	31,0	9,4
Burnout	0 - 132	41	54,2	18,6
Norms regarding emotion	8 - 40	41	16,3	5,8
Emotion control	4 - 20	59	11,8	3,3
Display specific emotions	12 - 60	61	36,8	7,6
Positive specific	8 - 40	74	29,7	6,6
Negative specific	4 - 20	35	7,0	3,1
Display positive emotions	5 - 25	72	18,0	4,1
Display negative emotions	7 - 35	40	14,1	4,8
Display neutral emotions	4 - 20	53	10,6	2,8
Empathy	4 - 20	66	13,1	2,8
Demands for sensitivity	4 - 20	65	13,0	2,8
Emotional dissonance	5 - 25	58	14,4	3,7
Interaction control	4 - 20	59	11,8	3,1
Extent of client contact	4 - 20	60	12,0	4,7

**Table 2. Correlations between burnout and emotions**

	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment	Burnout
Norms regarding emotion	0,123 (0,221)	-0,031 (0,758)	-0,035 (0,731)	0,049 (0,631)
Emotion control	-0,056 (0,577)	-0,055 (0,588)	0,189 (0,059)	0,044 (0,665)
Display specific emotions	-0,027 (0,787)	-0,016 (0,872)	<b>0,254(0,011*)</b>	0,107 (0,289)
Positive specific	-0,143 (0,156)	-0,106 (0,296)	<b>0,286 (0,004**)</b>	0,024 (0,815)
Negative specific	<b>0,241 (0,016*)</b>	0,188 (0,062)	0,010 (0,921)	<b>0,213(0,033*)</b>
Display positive emotions	<b>-0,296 (0,003**)</b>	<b>-0,293 (0,003**)</b>	<b>0,402 (0,000**)</b>	-0,071 (0,480)
Display negative emotions	<b>0,248 (0,013*)</b>	<b>0,272 (0,006**)</b>	<b>-0,213 (0,033*)</b>	0,131 (0,194)
Display neutral emotions	-0,010 (0,924)	0,057 (0,575)	0,083 (0,410)	0,054 (0,592)
Empathy	-,045 (0,658)	-0,010 (0,921)	<b>0,314 (0,001**)</b>	0,129 (0,202)
Demands for sensitivity	-0,145 (0,149)	-0,043 (0,673)	<b>0,248 (0,013*)</b>	0,023 (0,822)
Emotional dissonance	0,085 (0,403)	<b>0,294(0,003**)</b>	-0,030 (0,766)	0,130 (0,197)
Interaction control	0,194 (0,053)	<b>0,286(0,004**)</b>	0,047 (0,643)	<b>0,234(0,019*)</b>
Extent of client contact	0,180 (0,074)	0,073 (0,470)	<b>0,382(0,000**)</b>	<b>0,328(0,001**)</b>

### Details of comparative analysis:

**Sex:** male displays more emotional exhaustion ( $p = 0.025$ ) and depersonalization ( $p = 0.013$ ).

**Having children:** those who have children show greater personal accomplishment ( $p = 0.004$ ) but also higher levels of burnout ( $p = 0.015$ ).

**Professional situation:** the firefighters with salary feel more control about expressing emotions ( $p = 0.030$ ) and display more negative emotions ( $p = 0.035$ ) but also have a higher extent of client contact ( $p = 0.000$ ).

## 5. Conclusions

- Positive emotions experienced in the workplace seem to be protective of burnout, whereas negative emotions appear to increase the risk of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.
- The perception of emotions could be a way to prevent burnout. It is important to think about the multiple and cumulative effects of the different conditions and the working environment in which firefighters operate, especially the emotions that can arouse and that could influence the development of burnout.

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